

Jesus appears: Acts 2:14a; 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

## **As a seminarian, I never seemed to be there when Jesus arrived.**

by [Susan Andrews](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

When I was in seminary, Doubting Thomas was my soul mate. Jesus kept "appearing" to my fellow students within the rich stories of the Christian tradition. But like Thomas, I never seemed to be there when Jesus arrived. Why? Because the absurdity of the resurrection rumor had sent me away. I could not see the mark on Jesus' hands or touch the wound in his side. So I moved down the street to the Unitarians. Their faith made sense, with its distant and daring God, its passionate witness for justice, its bold support for inclusive ministry. Yes, theirs was a doing faith, a touchable faith, an energetic faith. And I didn't have to sit around waiting for a dead God to reappear.

But then a strange thing happened. I found myself restless and filled with sadness. I missed Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, the first appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the disciples is both intense and focused. The scene is set with realistic detail. It is the evening of the first day of the week, and the doors are locked. The anxious disciples are shut tightly inside. The suspicious world is shut tightly outside. The whole of creation is missing Jesus. Then, all of a sudden, he appears. Defying locked doors and locked hearts and locked vision, Jesus simply appears. A dead God is resurrected. A dead faith is re-created. A dead hope is born again.

I remember once seeing such locked-up hope. It was coffee hour, and a parishioner was fussing with the food table, hunched over and preoccupied despite the hubbub of voices swirling around her. It had been six months since her husband had died, and we had yet to touch base in an unhurried way. As soon as I approached, her eyes welled up with tears. She tried to smile and be brave, but the ragged edges of grief had ravaged her face. After a few moments, she looked around to see if anyone was nearby, and then she began to whisper.

"I had a terrifying experience last week. You'll probably think I'm nuts, but I have to tell someone. You know," she went on, "the nights are the worst. I hear noises in the house, and I can't get used to sleeping in bed alone. It must have been three o'clock in the morning and I was staring at the ceiling, willing myself back to sleep, when all of a sudden it happened. Bob came back. He came back and crawled into bed with me. He didn't say a word. He just appeared-and then faded away. I felt immediate peace and warmth and hope, and now I don't feel so alone." Then, glancing up in pink but eager embarrassment, she asked, "You don't think I'm crazy, do you?"

No, I don't think she was or is crazy. Instead she is blessed, blessed with a God who just appears-in dreams, in visions, in people, in words, in intuitions. The truth of Easter is that all of humanity is blessed with a God who defies the locks of logic and grief and prejudice and fear, a God who blesses us and then sends us, fresh and filled with hope, back into a hopeless world.

In John's Gospel, Easter coincides with Pentecost. Jesus appears, breathes, sends and commissions-all in one burst of holy energy. God's warm and palpable presence startles and unsettles and stirs up the disciples. And they are never the same. There is almost a sense that God is slightly out of control, spilling over with an emphatic affirmation of life, filling the world with both urgency and joy. In Luke's version of Pentecost, Peter captures the moment perfectly: This is Jesus whom God raised up, "having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24).

The Christian faith is the only world religion that takes as its logo an emphatic symbol of death. And yet the central affirmation of Christianity is hopeful life. Jesus just keeps appearing-again and again-to unlock the barriers between faith and doubt, between life and death, between past and future, between fear and joy. Jesus keeps appearing, a dependable reminder of our dependable God.

It is a Jesus kind of joy that fuels the faith of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and shaped the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its efforts to heal postapartheid South Africa. It is a Jesus kind of justice speaking truth in Jasper, Texas, resurrecting community out of the ashes of racial hatred. It is a Jesus kind of faith filling the Christian churches in Palestine, attempting to pour prophetic patience onto the troubled waters of the Middle East peace process. Wherever it seems as if death has demolished life, Jesus just appears, and fresh hope abounds.

I still admire the Unitarians. But I cannot escape the mark of my baptism. Jesus is an "imperishable, undefiled and unfading" inheritance (1 Pet. 1:4), a living hope that keeps appearing in the locked corners of this defiled world. Again and again Jesus comes to where we are, startling us and breathing on us and sending us to be embodied hope for others. Like Thomas, we can miss the moment if we are so intent on proving God or playing God or pushing God that we don't actually ponder the presence of God. We can gather in community, joined by our common fear and our common vulnerability. As the resurrected body of Christ in the world we can experience God, and then become together what we can never be alone.

The Good News of the gospel is clear. When we least expect him, and when we most need him, Jesus just appears. May it be so.